DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 297 363 CS 211 436

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TITLE The Rhetoric of Essay Test Prompts.
PUB DATE Mar 88
NOTE 23p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (39th, St. Louis, MO, March 17-19, 1988).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Freshmen; *Cues; *Essay Tests; Higher Education; *Prompting; Readability; *Rhetoric; *Test Construction
IDENTIFIERS Rhetorical Devices

ABSTRACT

A study examined the reaction of college freshmen to 30 essay test prompts to determine if rhetorical factors in the prompt would affect a student's choice of that prompt. The subjects, 40 college freshman enrolled in an introductory English course, rated eight rhetorical qualities of the essay prompts: (1) whether the essay would be easy to write; (2) interesting to write; (3) easy to organize; (4) whether one could see what the questioner was looking for; (5) whether one could express personal ideas; (6) whether one could find a lot to say; (7) whether the question would likely be chosen; and (8) whether a good grade might result. Each class of 20 students responded to 15 of the prompts. Results indicated that the choice of one prompt over another was related to whether the student believed a good grade is likely, which was correlated to whether the student believed he or she would find a lot to say on the topic. The choice was also influenced by the interrelated factors of whether the student could see what the questioner was looking for and if he or she could thus easily organize the essay. A prompt written in a more readable form was more likely to be chosen; it seemed also that longer prompts had a better likelihood of selection, and that prompts phrased as questions were preferred over those that gave directions. (Two tables of data and the essay prompts used are appended.) (RS)

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The Rhetoric of Essay Test Prompts

Running Head: Essay Prompts

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A version of this paper was presented at the CCCC in St. Louis, March 1988.

CS211436

ABSTRACT

Freshman college students' reactions to 30 essay test prompts were analyzed to determine if rhetorical factors in the prompt would affect a student's choice of that prompt to write on. High correlations were found between all 8 items on a Lickert scale rating evaluating ease, interest, choice, understanding, organization, personal interest, ability to write a lot, and estimation of a good grade. Prompts written more simply, according to a Flesch readability scale, were seen as easier, more interesting, and were more likely to be chosen. Prompts employing questions were also rated as easier and more likely to be chosen than those phrased only as directions.

There are a number of fruitful ways to analyze essay testing. Most are concerned with practical results: with validity and reliability--see, for example, Stewart & Grobe (1979), Quellmalz et al (1982), Blok (1985), and Chase (1986). My intention is different. I am interested in students' affective responses to essay prompts. Specifically, I explore how certain rhetorical elements affect the ways students select essay prompts to write on. I do not study how well students write or how the structure of the prompt affects their responses, although, obviously, these are important issues; these topics have found some elaboration in the work of Brossell (1983), Brossell & Ash (1984), Smith et al (1985), Kegley (1986), and Kundilier (1986). The approach a student chooses in answering a question is indeed influenced by the way the prompt is phrased. But why, when given a choice, does a student select one prompt to write on rather than another? This is a very typical situation in an essay test. Students are asked to first choose and then respond to one or more of a number of prompts. Are students influenced in their choices by the way a prompt is worded? Does readability enter as a factor? What other factors might cause a student to choose one prompt and not another?

For a sample of prompts I used essay exams that had been given as departmental tests at the end of the English I course at Indiana University of Pennsylvania over the past six years. The prompts were devised by various hands and offered a variety of approaches. All sought, at least in principle, to elicit good essays rather than to test knowledge of a text <u>per se</u>. My sample

consisted of thirty prompts (listed in Appendix A). The lengths varied from a low of 29 words to a high of 121, with an average length of 53 words, and from 2 to 8 sentences, with an average of 3.47 sentences. Eighteen of the prompts incorporated questions; twelve contained only instructions. The readability of the prompts varied on a Flesch scale from 45 (difficult) to 90 (very easy), with a mean of 63.67 (standard). I then devised a survey asking students to respond, on a five point Lickert scale, to eight qualities: whether the essay would be easy to write, interesting to write, easy to organize, whether one could see what the questioner is looking for, whether one could express personal ideas, whether one could find a lot to say, whether the question would likely be chosen, and whether a good grade might result. I gave the survey to two classes of 20 English I students; each class responded to 15 of the prompts. As the students were soon to take such a test, the subject was much on their minds.

My first concern was in the possible inter-relationships between the eight items on the scale. Would there be positive correlations between, for example, an understanding of what the questioner was looking for and a prediction of a good grade? Would the ability to express personal ideas be likely to result in choosing that topic to write on? To address these questions, I measured the Pearson Correlation Coefficients between each of the eight survey items. All eight items correlated with one another to the .05 level of significance (the level of probability used throughout this study), though some of the

correlations seem much stronger than others. These results are found in Table 1.

First, grades are important for students. While that comes as no surprise, it is comforting to find it statistically confirmed. There was a high correlation between the answers for "I might get a good grade" and "I might choose this one." What factors might make a student think a good grade was in the wings? "Finding a lot to say" proved to be the factor that correlated most strongly with "getting a good grade"; in fact, that correlation ($r = .75$) turned out to be the highest of any in the study. Some other factors (besides the grade) that were strongly involved in a decision to choose a particular essay were finding the essay easy to write, finding it interesting to write, and, as might be expected, finding a lot to say on the topic.

What would make a topic easy to write on? Here it turns out that the item most closely related to ease (outside of choosing the essay) is understanding what the questioner is looking for. And if we examine that factor, we find that ease of organization is most closely related to understanding the questioner. Those two factors, knowing what the questioner is looking for and finding the essay easy to organize, are also closely related to the estimation that a good grade might be received. On the other hand, the factor which showed the weakest degree of correlation with the other items on the survey was expressing personal ideas. Only in relation to finding a lot to say did this item appear important.

In summary, a student who finds it easy to see what a

questioner asks also believes it will be easy to organize that essay. That will lead the student to feel he or she might get a good grade. Finding a lot to say about the essay will contribute even more to a sense of an impending good grade. These factors, in conjunction with a feeling that the essay will be interesting to write, will lead the student to choose that essay. Being able to develop personal ideas comes in pretty low on the totem pole, at least compared to these other factors.

Obviously, when a student is faced with a real-life testing situation, rather than a survey instrument such as this one, other issues, such as knowledge of the material to be tested, will enter into the picture. But what other factors might shape a student's sense of knowing what the examiner was looking for or belief that a good organization for the essay will be found? One factor might be readability. A prompt difficult to read might seem a prompt difficult to write about.

I analyzed all thirty prompts according to the Flesch Index of readability. While the Flesch scale is the old warhorse of readability, it correlates highly with all other major scales and with validations by way of cloze testing. To cross validate the scale, I also analyzed the prompts according to the reading grade level analysis provided by the program in Wang's Grammatik II. The correlation was extremely high ($r = -.836$). I then looked at how readability related to the eight qualities the students had used to rate the prompts. I found by a one-tailed test significant correlations between readability and the ratings for "easy to write," "interesting to write," and for choosing the

prompt if given a choice. In other words, an essay prompt written with a greater readability ease will be judged as easier to respond to, more interesting to write about, and will be more likely to be chosen than one written at a more difficult level. Surprisingly (to me, at least), no statistically significant relationship was found between readability and the quality, "easy to see what the questioner is looking for." The correlation was close to significant, however ($p = .068$), and certainly is suggestive. These results are found in Table 2.

Would the length of the prompt in and of itself be a factor in choosing that prompt? Perhaps shorter prompts would seem easier? Or maybe a longer prompt would give a writer a better sense of what the questioner is looking for? I measured the relation between the length of the prompts and the eight qualities and found no significant correlations. However, two items were close to significance and thus are suggestive: easy to write ($p = .059$) and easy to organize ($p = .073$). The results suggest but do not prove that students may view <u>longer</u> prompts as easier to organize and write about.

I next looked at how the rhetorical structuring of the prompts might affect students' responses. The basic structure of a prompt is to present one or more statements about the text (or direct quotes from the text), and follow that by either questions, directions, or some combination of the two. All but two of the prompts used this structure. Following the initial statement(s) about or from the text, eight prompts used only questions; twelve gave only directions; and ten used a

combination of questions and directions. Comparing the groups, I found prompts using only questions were judged significantly easier to write about than prompts containing only directions ($T=2.17$ [df 17], $p < .05$). A one-tailed test of significance showed that prompts with questions were more likely to be chosen than those without questions ($T=1.76$ [df 17], p [one tailed] $< .05$). I considered the possibility that these results might be related to readability, but I found no significant differences in the Flesch Readability levels between prompts with questions and those without.

Thus a student chooses one prompt over another at least in part by how that prompt is structured. Why are questions more likely to be chosen than statements giving directions? Here I will propose several possibilities. In creating a taxonomy of essay prompts, I distinguished between two basic formats: questions and directions. Questions were relatively easy to categorize: almost all took the form of how, what, why, who, and does. Moreover, most seemed to lead in one particular direction, asking for well-defined responses: "What weaknesses as related to conservation does Leopold see in our educational system?" or "Does Miss Angelou seem to agree with Uncle Willie's concept?" Directions, however, were impossible to categorize so neatly. As I developed a list of words defining directional statements, I soon realized that I would achieve an enormous group of single item sub-classes. Within the thirty prompts, I found the following terms: discuss, identify, assess, examine, argue, show, comment, explain, support, speak, analyze, think, illustrate,

find examples, draw upon, use, consider, find, compare, explore, trace, select, cite, contrast, discover, establish, develop, mention, assume, and draw—thirty terms in all. This variety creates far less well defined tasks. In addition, prompts phrased as directions often did not suggest ways to structure responses: "Assess Fussell's assumptions, descriptions, and/or attitudes toward the proles" or "Show that the hints in 'Disorder' fit in with the more obvious and specific beliefs he stresses in other essays" or, finally, the cryptic single word command placed at the end of the prompt that students rated as least likely to be chosen, "Explain."

Obviously students consider other elements in choosing which essay prompts to address. The prompts most likely to be chosen seemed to address areas central to students' experiences: education, family life, personal traits, and sex, while those least likely to be chosen often concerned social or political issues or asked for a direct analysis of the text—but this was not always the case, and, as I showed earlier, an ability to express personal ideas was the least of the reasons for which a student might choose a prompt.

This study demonstrates that students are quite sensitive to a number of rhetorical elements in reacting to essay prompts. The choice of one prompt over another is related to whether a student feels a good grade is likely, and that is tied to whether the student believes he or she will find a lot to say on the topic. The choice will also be influenced by the interrelated factors of whether the student sees what the questioner is

looking for and if he or she can thus can easily organize the essay. An essay that is interesting to write will help bring the student to choose that prompt, although the ability to express personal ideas may not be as important in creating interest as we might think. A prompt that is written in a simpler, more readable form will be more likely to be chosen, and it may be that longer prompts have a better likelihood of selection. Finally, prompts phrased as questions seem to students preferable to those that simply give directions.

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Table 1

Correlation of Survey Items

Variable Labels
Q1 The essay will be easy to write.
Q2 The essay will be interesting to write.
Q3 I might choose this one if given a choice.
Q4 It is easy to see what the questioner is looking for.
Q5 It would be easy to organize the essay.
Q6 I would probably express a lot of my own, personal ideas here.
Q7 I would probably find a lot to say in this essay.
Q8 I might get a good grade on this essay.

	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8
Q1	1.000 p = .	.5923 p = .00	.6948 p = .00	.6542 p = .00	.6092 p = .00	.3755 p = .00	.5626 p = .00	.6266 p = .00
Q2	.5923 p = .00	1.000 p = .	.6972 p = .00	.5327 p = .00	.5300 p = .00	.4032 p = .00	.6077 p = .00	.5898 p = .00
Q3	.6948 p = .00	.6972 p = .00	1.000 p = .	.6512 p = .00	.6119 p = .00	.4470 p = .00	.6982 p = .00	.7136 p = .00
Q4	.6542 p = .00	.5327 p = .00	.6512 p = .00	1.000 p = .	.6568 p = .00	.3407 p = .00	.6259 p = .00	.6516 p = .00
Q5	.6092 p = .00	.5300 p = .00	.6119 p = .00	.6568 p = .00	1.000 p = .	.3848 p = .00	.5962 p = .00	.6524 p = .00
Q6	.3755 p = .00	.4032 p = .00	.4470 p = .00	.3407 p = .00	.3848 p = .00	1.000 p = .	.6132 p = .00	.4978 p = .00
Q7	.5626 p = .00	.6077 p = .00	.6982 p = .00	.6259 p = .00	.5962 p = .00	.6132 p = .00	1.000 p = .	.7506 p = .00
Q8	.6266 p = .00	.5898 p = .00	.7136 p = .00	.6516 p = .00	.6524 p = .00	.4978 p = .00	.7506 p = .00	1.000 p = .

Table 2

Correlation of Flesch Readability Scores with Other Factors

	EASE	INTEREST	CHOICE	CLARITY
FLESCH	.3102 p = .048	.3136 p = .046	.3653 p = .024	.2791 p = .068

	ORGANIZE	PERSONAL	FLUENT	GRADE
FLESCH	.2440 p = .097	.2178 p = .124	.2334 p = .107	.2497 p = .092

Appendix A

Essay Prompts

1. Paul Fussell admits that conditions of class distinction are a "touchy" subject which challenge many deeply held ideals. Discuss the suggestion that class differences are directly opposed to the ideal of America as a melting pot.

2. On the surface, Class is an entertaining, often funny book; however, Fussell is aware that class distinctions, both now and in the past, have led to hostility and open conflict. Identify those sections of Class where you think Fussell writes in his most serious tone. Then drawing upon these ideas as well as those from your own observations and reading, find examples of the "darker" side of class conflict. You may use current or historical examples as well as local, national or international ones.

3. Ms. Dillard writes on page 65 that "More than one insect--the possibility of fertile reproduction--is an assault on all human value, all hope of a reasonable God." Comparison between human values and values of the natural world is a constant theme in her book. What are the main values called into question? Do the comparisons seem to strengthen or weaken the legitimacy of those values?

4. Fussell launches a rather savage attack upon institutions of

higher education such as IUP. from your experiences at this school (or others like it), assess the "validity" of Fussell's remarks: Is IUP an exception or does it fall too easily into Fussell's criteria? You may consider IUP's students, professors, administrations, courses or social institutions.

5. Fussell's attitude toward proles is entirely negative— or is it? Assess Fussell's assumptions, descriptions and/or attitudes toward the proles. Are they the "necessary" victims of a class structure or do they contribute to or even at times revitalize social institutions? Do you see any advantages to being a prole?

6. Throughout A Sand County Almanac Leopold attacks our educational system as part of the conservation problem. In your opinion, what weaknesses as related to conservation does Leopold see in our educational system? What weaknesses do you see? Would a better educated population be more responsive to solving these problems?

7. We often see sacrifice as a necessary part of living and as a test of courage and principle. How does this concept of sacrifice fit Leopold's book? What types of sacrifice does he call for? What are his reasons? How would you be affected?

8. You are undoubtedly aware of this past week's accident at a Russian nuclear power plant which, according to experts, may have precipitated a meltdown. What attitude would Leopold have taken

on the event? How would he have used the accident as a means or mechanism for discussing what interrelated set of problems?

9. Like most youngsters growing up, Maya finds it difficult to reconcile the advice and examples of several mentors who seem to disagree. Do Annie Henderson, Vivian Baxter and Mrs. Flowers really present conflicting models and ideals? Or can we find common principles that allow their views to be reconciled?

10. "I remember never believing that whites were really real" (p. 20). ". . . I couldn't force myself to think of them as people" (p. 21). Discuss the implications of these statements in Maya Angelou's book.

11. Underlying many of the courser elements or episodes in I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings lies a basic striving for human dignity. Examine the validity of that statements.

12. Upon Bailey's return "on an errand to whitefolks' town" for Uncle Willie, his face is ashen gray as he narrates his experience with the dead colored man who had been fished out of the pond near the Calaboose. "Uncle Willie, why do they hate us so much?" he asks, and his uncle replies: "'They don't really hate us. They don't know us. How can they hate us? They mostly scared'" (pp. 165-167). Argue for or against Uncle Willie's explanation of the whites' treatment of the black man. Does Miss Angelou seem to agree with Uncle Willie's concept?

13. One of the most entertaining essays in The Journey Home is "Disorder and Early Sorrow." Many of Abbey's attitudes--toward himself, technology, the desert (or the wilderness), and society's values--appear there, although they may not be immediately apparent. Show that the hints in "Disorder" fit in with the more obvious and specific beliefs he stresses in other essays.

14. Think about Chance's behavior and the way he consciously responds to situations by comparing them to what he has seen on TV and acting accordingly. Do you think Kosinski suggests that TV provides all the education one needs for life? Comment on the plausibility of this proposition as a general principle.

15. Chance is both illiterate and impotent; Kosinski seems to say, Therefore he is immensely successful. Is the irony of this equation directed toward Chance, the society that accords him success, both, or something else? Or is the equation inaccurate? Explain.

16. Chance/Chauncey begins in the garden and ends in the garden. Does this suggest that he returns to the garden in order to go back to what he was at the beginning, or is the garden now different because he has changed?

17. Chance is an extraordinary character, although the novel

might suggest that his story represents what an average man could achieve if the circumstances were right. --Explore the validity of that comment.

18.In his speech to the schoolboard Conroy says, "I tried to make my classes a stimulating experience for my students .... life experiences, creative experiences." (p. 305) What is Conroy's philosophy of education? How does it compare to the other philosophies of Peter Walter, Mrs. Brow, Bernie Schein, Bennington, the Piedmont.

19. White guilt is one major theme found in Conroy's work. Trace the development and handling of Conroy's white guilt and the way in which he attempts to expiate the guilt he feels.

20. At the end of the school year Conroy feels he has "come to some truce or understanding about myself (Conroy) and the people of Yamacraw Island." (p. 310) Select and analyze at least four specific incidents that reveal Conroy's increased self-awareness and maturation.

21. Literally the river separates Yamacraw Island from mainland South Carolina. Examine at least three incidents in the work where the symbolic meaning of the river is illustrated. How and why is the crossing of the river significant?

22. Aldo Leopold on occasion speaks of himself as a hunter. By

citing specific sections of the text and commenting upon them, show how Leopold's ethical posture as an ecologist might appear to conflict with his acceptance of hunting. Explain your own position on hunting as an ethical matter.

23. Compare and contrast some of your own experiences with some significant, parallel experiences of the youthful Richard Wright in Black Boy. You many wish to show that there are important differences or you may discover that important similarities exist.

24. Black Boy presents the case of the individual black as a victim not only of racial prejudice but also of the general attitude of blacks in their resigned acceptance of a servile position. Do you find him, in this respect, a champion of the cause, or has he damaged the cause of his own people? Establish and develop a thesis defending your position; support your reasoning with evidence from the book.

25. Richard feels very nervous in the face of a white culture he does not understand. As he says on page 215, "The words and actions of white people were baffling signs to me. I was living in a culture and not a civilization and I could learn how that culture worked only by living with it." Perhaps you too have found some difficulty in your younger years in learning how to act in new roles that you did not understand. Naturally you, as well as Richard, have made some mistakes along the way.

Please discuss the process of learning to adopt new roles in a society in which the rules are sometimes unclear. Speak in terms of both Richard Wright and yourselves.

26. Family life is very important to Richard, not only in his early years, but even as he becomes older. Please discuss the different types of experiences that his family offers to Richard. What sorts of help or hindrance do the different family members offer? Is his experience unique or are you acquainted with similar experiences either in your own life or in other works you have read.

27. The characters of The Color Purple live in a brutal world; mention and analyze three different types of brutality. Do not restrict yourself to a discussion of physical brutality; try to invent other categories. In addition, discuss the probable causes of these types of brutality.

28. Although The Color Purple has been immensely popular both as a novel and a movie, its sexual frankness disturbs some readers. Assume that you wish to recommend the book to certain reading audiences. To whom would you recommend the book and why? Whom would you dissuade from reading the book and why? Try to consider groups or types of readers rather than simply specific individuals. In addition, discuss elements of the book other than its sexual frankness.

29. Even though such awareness is initially a source of suffering, the novel celebrates the need for one to be aware of one's own family history, to fink one's "roots." Why does her family's history cause her pain? What does it contribute to her growing sense of worth and independence? Try to draw parallels to your own family's sense of its history.

30. Maya, a black woman, rises above her humble origins to become a success. To what do you attribute her success, and is this peculiar to Maya? Is there any underlying principle or moral tenet which might serve to help others who want to "make it" in our society?